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The Perils Of Reporting From Moscow

By Philip Taubman

THE VOICE ON THE PHONE was familiar, a foreigner in Moscow with good Soviet sources. "Nick Daniloff has been arrested and will be charged with espionage," he said.

The words hit like a lightning bolt. Moments before, I had returned to our apartment after strolling about Moscow, enjoying a warm, gentle Saturday afternoon late last month with thousands of Muscovites relaxing outdoors. Touched by the festive atmosphere, I felt more at ease than at almost any time since arriving here a year ago. It seemed impossible that Daniloff, the Moscow correspondent for U.S. News & World Report and an acute observer of Russian life, would be seized as a spy. It sounded like a flashback to the days of Stalin.

Shaken, I called the Daniloffs' apartment. Daniloff's wife, Ruth, said he was out but was expected back soon. Afraid of alarming her, I said nothing about the call. When I phoned the duty officer at the United States Embassy and asked if there were any unusual problems, he said no and I left it at that, wondering if I was the target of a nasty joke.

Then I got a call from Jeffrey Trimble, recently arrived in Moscow to replace Daniloff, who was planning to leave the Soviet Union in late September after a five-and-a-half-year tour.

"Nick went out this morning to meet a Russian friend and he's way overdue," Trimble reported. "Ruth thinks he's in trouble."

I told Trimble I would be right over.

About 30 minutes after I reached the U.S. News & World Report office, Daniloff called. He was in custody. He said he had been arrested in the Lenin Hills, a park area near his apartment, moments after his Russian friend handed him an envelope, saying it contained newspaper clippings. Daniloff said the package turned out to be stuffed with classified papers.

It was every Moscow correspondent's worst fear come true: the setup, the instant when all pretense of fair play is dropped and the ugliest instincts of the Soviet system close in. In Daniloff's case, it seemed to be a crude attempt to retaliate for the arrest in New York the previous week of Gennadi F. Zakharov, a Soviet physicist attached to the United Nations Secretariat, who was charged with espionage against the United States.

Daniloff was charged with espionage and spent some two weeks in Lefortovo Prison in Moscow. As this article went to press, he was released into the custody of the United States Embassy, but he would not be allowed to leave the Soviet Union; Zakharov was given over to Soviet diplomats.

Whatever the final outcome of Daniloff's case, it is a chilling reminder of the intense and volatile conditions in which every Western correspondent in Moscow lives and works. The handcuffs that were snapped shut around Nick Daniloff's wrists on Aug. 30 were the extreme extension of a system of intimidation and restraints that governs the lives of foreigners, particularly American correspondents.

I MOVED HERE FROM WASHINGTON LAST September with my wife, Felicity Barringer, also a journalist, and our two sons, Michael, 5 years old, and Gregory, 2. We imagined nothing quite like the life an American correspondent's family leads in the Soviet Union.

There are wonderful moments of intimate engagement with the people and culture, warm evenings sitting around cramped tables in Soviet apartments sipping vodka, talking, arguing, laughing with Russian friends. There are breathtakingly cold afternoons in Gorky Park where, in the slanting winter sunlight, half of Moscow seems to be outdoors, skating, skiing or strolling across the frozen landscape. Often I walk by the Kremlin's towering red walls and marvel at the chance to observe at close range a land and political system that loom so large in the mind of America.

But isolation, frustration and sometimes fear run like a leitmotif through our lives. Each moment of engagement is offset by innumerable moments of estrangement. The guiding principle for the authorities, rooted in a centuries-old xenophobic strain, is to control our contact with the society. Not just to project the best possible image of Com-

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munism but to prevent us, and our ideas, from infecting Russians. It is, in essence, an effort to censor our copy by censoring our lives.

A Westerner who wants to see and feel the rough edges of the society, to hear firsthand, without the filter of official chaperones, the ambitions and frustrations of even a few of the Soviet Union's 280 million people, must break out of the isolation and suspicion. It is an effort that constantly tests our patience and ingenuity, and calls for considerable courage among the Russians we befriend.

Western reporters have always faced unusual problems and pressures in Moscow, but the climate has been particularly difficult in recent years. A new law was enacted two years ago tightening restrictions on contacts with foreigners. The children of Americans, once welcomed in Soviet schools, were turned away last year, ostensibly because of overcrowding. The leaders of the human-rights movement, a main point of contact for correspondents a decade ago, have almost all been imprisoned, exiled to Siberia or forced to emigrate, often after trials in which the main evidence of anti-Soviet activity was association with foreigners. Daniloff's arrest has poisoned the atmosphere even more.

Until the arrest, conditions seemed to be improving somewhat under Mikhail S. Gorbachev, who took power 18 months ago. But, despite the fact that senior Soviet officials are now more accessible to Western correspondents, Gorbachev's campaign for greater *glasnost*, or openness, has so far translated mostly into more sophisticated ways of trying to manage the news rather than more access to the society. Authorities, for example, increasingly keep us occupied with press conferences and other "news" events that have the dual advantage of promoting Kremlin policies while diverting our attention from other subjects.

As long as 300 years ago, Peter the Great, impressed with Western civilization, imported foreigners to help modernize Russia, and then isolated them in a section of Moscow called the "German Suburb," which had been designated for non-Russians. Generations of foreigners have been ostracized and coddled by a society that is both spellbound and unnerved by the outside world. We are no exception.

Home and office for us is a somewhat dilapidated concrete apartment building in central Moscow. It is the exclusive domain of foreigners. Within walking distance of the Kremlin and Red Square, the yellow, nine-story structure overlooks a 10-lane thoroughfare that circles the center of Moscow, one of the city's many broad boulevards. Our neighborhood, a warren of twisting side streets and compact buildings, many dating back to the 19th century, has a surprisingly Mediterranean flavor with pastel colored facades and walled gardens.

Our building, 12/24 Sadovo Samotechnaya Ulitsa, better known in the foreign community as "Sad Sam," is under 24-hour guard by uniformed militiamen. Anyone coming into the compound passes within a few feet of the sentry, whose primary job is to stop and question any Russian who doesn't work inside. We share the building with journalists, businessmen and diplomats from the United States, Italy, India, France, Britain, Norway, Japan and Yugoslavia.

The asphalt courtyard — flooded in winter to make a skating rink — resembles an international schoolyard, with games going on in several languages. But every inch of the yard is bounded by 15-foot walls, topped in some parts by barbed wire.

Compounds like it are scattered around Moscow. They are the heart of the foreign cocoon. We could live within this environment, using a network of hard currency shops, restaurants, hotels, and a variety of other privileged but segregated services, without meeting more than a handful of Russians or spending a ruble.

These conveniences are part of a tacit bargain with the authorities. If we stay where they want us and don't try to mix with the society, we can have comforts and amenities far superior to anything available to most Russians. If we want to break out, we face inconvenience at best, and, at worst, the kind of treatment given Daniloff, or a variety of lesser forms of harassment, including heavy-handed surveillance, demands for identifying documents, the taking of names and sometimes the confiscation of notes or film.

Felicity, my wife, was forcibly evicted from the Kiev Station in Moscow in May while interviewing citizens fleeing the Ukrainian capital because of radiation from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The other day, a militiaman seized her notebook when he discovered her at a Moscow cemetery where Chernobyl victims are buried.

"Don't think you can avoid them," a former American Moscow correspondent told us before we left Washington. "You're amateurs; they're pros."

My first instinct was to discount some of the warnings about harassment, tapped phones, bugged offices and apartments and the suspicion that we were told settles over foreigners like a heavy fog. But I underestimated the way doubt and mistrust could creep into our lives, corroding personal and professional relationships. Before long, Felicity and I found ourselves leading somewhat compartmentalized lives, in which our separate meetings with Russian friends were often not mentioned until several days later when we had a chance to take a walk and talk privately. I soon realized that most of the 30 American correspondents lead a double life, fraternizing with fellow Americans but rarely mixing them with Russian friends.

Long before the Daniloff case, we realized that almost any Russian we meet could be a K.G.B. plant who might be called on to set us up for a provocation, just as Daniloff's friend "Misha" handed him a package of classified papers after four years of friendly contacts.

Almost all American correspondents here have sources like Misha, Russians we have met on seemingly innocent encounters. Like Misha, most do not seem sinister, and may have no link to the K.G.B. when we first meet them. But the authorities are vigilant; when they find a Russian consorting with an American correspondent, they have the leverage to turn him into an informant or agent provocateur.

Responding to that danger is one of the most difficult and painful adjustments for an American. Distrust is not a trait I admire, but I have been forced to lean on it to protect myself. With very few exceptions — and perhaps even they are a mistake — I have kept the threat of betrayal firmly in mind when making friends and developing sources. I am sure that is precisely what the authorities hoped to reinforce with the Daniloff case, for they are most successful in circumscribing my work when I limit it myself.

The closest I've come to a "provocation" was during a trip to the Soviet Baltic port of Tallin, where I was seated one evening by a restaurant maître d'hôtel at a table with an attractive young Russian woman who just happened to speak fluent English. After dinner, she invited herself to my hotel for a drink. I bought her several cocktails in the lobby bar, then escorted her to a taxi. Had the authorities wanted to pounce on me, I'm sure even that casual encounter could have been blown up into an incident.

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IN MOSCOW, AMERICAN correspondents are surrounded by Russians — translators, drivers, secretaries, maids, language tutors, baby sitters, janitors, all of whom are provided by the Administration for Servicing the Diplomatic Corps, a Foreign Ministry agency known by its Russian initials, U.P.D.K. It is an open secret that these Russians, many of whom are skilled, hard-working professionals, are expected to report periodically on the activities and proclivities of their Western bosses.

When our American baby sitter recently lost her diary, my initial assumption was that she had misplaced it. But when an exhaustive search of the apartment and courtyard failed to locate it, I knew it was quite possible that one of the Russians had taken the journal so it could be checked for Russian names. She told us there were none.

The rest of the Russians we know fall into three rough categories. There are official Russians, people from the Foreign Ministry, newspapers, academic institutions and other organizations, who are authorized to see us. They have little hesitation about meeting for lunch or coming to our apartment for dinner. They are a source of limited but useful information and are always guarded in what they say.

Another group is composed of outcasts, desperate or disaffected Russians, including dissidents, who have been refused permission to emigrate and others with complaints so intense they reach out to American reporters. A decade ago, the human-rights movement was a vibrant group that challenged the Soviet system. Now, sadly, most "dissident" callers are cranks. I would include some sources, like Daniloff's friend Misha, in this group — Russians I met by chance and have stayed in touch with, but do not fully trust.

Finally, there are those who fall in between, Russians content to remain here, writers, artists, officials, many in responsible jobs, but skeptical enough about the system to risk befriending American reporters. These people, some of whom we have met through friends in the United States, are the ones we trust and value most because they offer us uncomplicated friendship and give us a window on the reality of the Soviet Union.

VLADIMIR AND Tanya (I have changed their names) live in a typical Soviet apartment — two small, tidy rooms plus a kitchen and bath, in a development, on the outskirts of Moscow, of huge high-rise buildings resembling Co-op City in the Bronx. They are both professionals and share the apartment with their two grown children, plus their daughter-in-law.

Their apartment, like every other I have seen in Moscow, is crammed with books, a testament to Russia's abiding respect and affection for the written word, one of this country's most appealing traits. Our last visit, in late summer, was suffused with the same warmth and mutual curiosity of previous dinners. The table was set with simple but delicious dishes miraculously created by Tanya from the sparse supplies available at local stores. As Vladimir poured vodka that had been steeped with herbs, we talked about the impact of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Soviet moratorium on nuclear testing, the prospects for a meeting this year between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, and the comparative horsepower of American and Soviet cars.

"How does our Zhiguli compare with your cars?" Vladimir asked.

When I replied in my ungrammatical but functional Russian that its acceleration compared favorably with American compacts, he seemed astounded and stopped a conversation between Felicity and Tanya to tell his wife.

From Vladimir and Tanya, their friends and other couples we know, we learned that many Muscovites doubted the Government's first glib assurances that Chernobyl posed no serious radiation risks. From them, we have gotten a sense of the tremendous pent-up curiosity among Russians about life in America. Every time we visit, questions fly.

"How much money do people make?" "Does everyone own a car?" "Can you really write what you want?"

"Isn't unemployment bad?" "Why is there so much crime?"

And always, "How do you like our country?"

We cherish these evenings, and wish we could repay the hospitality, but Vladimir and Tanya dare not visit our apartment. And we must take precautions when visiting them, as I learned the hard way soon after we arrived last fall.

I called an artist whose name I had been given by Russian émigré friends in the United States. I made the mistake of calling on our office phone, which I had been warned was tapped. We agreed to meet in Pushkin Square in central Moscow a few hours later. The artist and I talked for an hour in his studio and he agreed to come to dinner at our apartment the following week.

A few days before the dinner, I returned to the studio. The door was bolted. I rang the bell. The artist peered over my shoulder down the staircase, then motioned me inside. He told me two policemen had come to the studio an hour after my first visit and asked to see his documents — all Russians carry internal passports — on the pretext that he had witnessed an auto accident. "Philip, I'm sorry," he said, "but I cannot come to dinner."

Any lingering naïveté I had was dispelled on an icy night last November, when Serge Schmemann, The Times's bureau chief, and I drove to the Moscow apartment of Andrei Sakharov, the dissident physicist. Sakharov was banished to the city of Gorky in 1980, but Schmemann and I were following a hunch that his wife, Yelena Bonner, was there. On the ring road that circles the center of Moscow, a tan sedan that we recognized from a pool of K.G.B. cars always parked near Sad Sam merged into the traffic behind us.

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Outsi[illegible] we confronted three men. They identified themselves as Moscow plainclothes policemen and asked to see our press cards. They said no one was in the apartment, and escorted us back to our car. As we headed toward another part of Moscow to talk to a friend of Sakharov's, the tan sedan was behind us.

This kind of physical surveillance comes and goes. The goal seems to be to intimidate correspondents and any Russians who meet them. It often works, as my encounter with the artist demonstrated. Sometimes it can be a signal of heightened Government sensitivity about a human-rights case or some other issue. Then the frustration is knowing you are being followed without knowing exactly why.

I try to take a few simple precautions to avoid leading my Russian friends and sources into a trap, and then do my best to ignore the snooping on the theory that the more you let it bother you, the more effective it becomes. When I drive to see friends like Vladimir and Tanya, I make a few extra U-turns to see if I'm being followed and park some distance from my destination. It's not hard to spot a correspondent's car because many are foreign and all have special yellow license plates with black numerals and letters. Regular Soviet plates are white with black letters and numbers.

After my first mistake of calling the artist from the office, I now use pay phones far from our office. In winter, that relatively simple exercise becomes a small test of endurance because almost all of Moscow's pay phones are outdoors and few seem to work when the temperature falls far below freezing, which is often. I have no doubt the K.G.B. is aware of these unsophisticated maneuvers and can easily thwart them when it wants.

TO SEE THE SOVIET Union, one has to get outside Moscow. Even more than major Western cities and capitals, Moscow is a rarified environment, populated largely by an elite and provided with resources and provisions rarely found in most other Soviet cities.

But traveling poses its own problems for foreign reporters. Much of the country is closed to us and for those areas that are open, I must notify the Foreign Ministry at least 24 hours before I plan to go, informing it where I am headed, how I plan to get there and back, and when I will return. I have to give Intourist, the Soviet travel bureau, at least a week's notice so it can book transportation and lodging. I also need to arrange interviews in advance.

From the moment I leave Moscow, everything is structured to keep me segregated, all in the name of making my trip as comfortable as possible. I check in for domestic air travel at an area of the terminal reserved for foreigners. A special bus takes me to the plane, which is always empty when I board; I am seated, whenever possible, next to other foreigners. Only then are Russian passengers boarded. On trains, whole cars are reserved for foreigners.

At the destination city, an Intourist representative meets me at the airport or station and escorts me to the hotel in a private car. Unless the city is particularly remote, the hotel is almost certain to be operated by Intourist, meaning few Russians have access. The chances are good that my room and telephone are bugged and my movements around the city tracked.

When Felicity returned from a trip to Yalta in June, she and several other foreigners were met at the plane. When the Russian passengers started to follow them to the terminal, an irate airport official waved the Soviet citizens back, shouting, "They are foreigners. You do not belong with them."

If I drive outside Moscow, I must give the same advance notification, and supply the route of travel, make and description of the car and its license number. Militiamen at elevated checkpoints located every 30 miles or so along major roads monitor my progress. I find these Orwellian outposts among the most forbidding creations in the Soviet Union.

These varied restrictions are reinforced by a background atmosphere that can be stridently anti-American, even in this time of improved relations. The shrillest anti-Soviet campaigns in Washington seem mild compared with the coarse, unremitting anti-American propaganda here. It is hard to scan a newspaper without finding some outrageous description of America, like the recent report in Literaturnaya Gazeta, a main organ of the writers' union, that said 80 percent of American parents beat their children.

Periodically, the venom is directed against American correspondents. Recently, there was a scathing report in Sovetskaya Rossiya on the work and behavior of Donald Kimelman, a Philadelphia Inquirer reporter. The article accused Kimelman of distorting Soviet life and falsely implied that he was an alcoholic. Kimelman, one of the most perceptive American correspondents, left Moscow in July at the end of his full tour. An article about Daniloff that appeared two weeks ago in Isvestia, the official Government newspaper, characterized him in sarcastic tones as a clumsy American agent.

IN THE FACE OF THE constraints and tensions, there is a strong temptation to retreat into the sanctuary of the foreign community. The best and worst of the foreign cocoon is represented by the Mezhdunarodnaya Gostinitsa, or International Hotel, a modern complex on the banks of the Moscow River that has a 10-story atrium lobby, glass elevators and every amenity the Russians imagine a Westerner could want, including flocks of prostitutes roaming the bars after dark.

"Going to the Mezh," a commonly heard phrase among foreigners, is the closest thing to going home. The hotel has the best restaurant in Moscow, the Sakura, which offers raw fish flown in daily from Japan. There's also a bowling alley, a large indoor pool, a shop that sells Western electronic equipment and bars that serve Western beer and liquor. The only people not welcome at the hotel are Russians and the only currency not readily accepted is the ruble.

Our personal cocoon is a two-bedroom apartment that is spacious and luxurious by Soviet standards, quite comfortable by American. Like the Schmemanns' apartment, on the eighth floor, and The Times's bureau, on the third, it is rented on a long-term basis. The furnishings are Scandinavian modern, with lots of light colors to combat the winter darkness.

The United States Embassy, because of the unusual circumstances in Moscow, permits American reporters to send and receive mail through the diplomatic pouch, lets us buy dairy products and fresh vegetables at the commissary, and welcomes us at the snack bar, which serves breakfast and lunch, including pancakes and hamburgers.

The Soviet authorities, partly to insulate us from the long lines and sparse supplies that make shopping an ordeal for Russians, and partly to earn foreign currency, point us toward the special food and liquor stores, called *beriozkas*. They are usually tucked out of sight so as not to attract Soviet shoppers, who are turned away if they lack foreign money. The stores stock a variety of Western and Eastern European goods unavailable to the average Russian — frozen Hungarian chickens, Danish sausages, German beer and Coke.

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Visitors from the West have a hard time appreciating the economics of scarcity. A friend from New York came to dinner not long ago. When he spotted a platter of caviar, he said with a sigh, "That's what I like about Moscow." Another guest, the wife of a fellow correspondent, stared in amazement at the same dish and asked, "Felicity, where did you get the lemons?"

At first, we tried to avoid the Embassy commissary and the *beriozka* shops, standing in line with Russians at neighborhood stores or shopping at the farmers' market located a block away. But our efforts to buy as much as possible locally were disrupted by the arrival of winter and a rapid decline in the availability of fresh vegetables and fruits. The Chernobyl disaster in late April eliminated any remaining hopes. Because of the threat of radiation contamination in Soviet foods, we receive weekly grocery shipments from Stockmann, a large department store in Helsinki that ships fresh foods to Moscow by overnight train.

Despite the comforts of the foreign community, I miss the contact with Soviet society. I feel as if we are playing into the hands of the authorities every time I send the bureau driver to the train station to pick up my grocery shipment instead of going to the market myself.

As Michael returns to the fine Anglo-American school, I can't help feeling some regret that he was not admitted last year to a Russian kindergarten, especially now that he is showing an interest in learning Russian.

The rejection — compounded by encounters in our neighborhood park, where Russian families often leave as soon as Michael and Gregory arrive — has left its mark. "Dad, why can't we bring our Washington house here?" Michael asked one evening. Before I could reply, he said, "Never mind. I know why. It's American and they won't let it in."

When I look at the Russian maids and janitors who care for us and our building, I am repelled by the thought that one of these friendly people may have taken our baby sitter's diary and turned it over to the K.G.B.

It all brings to mind my first trip outside Moscow, a journey to the polar metropolis of Murmansk about a year ago. I went with a group of correspondents assembled by the Foreign Ministry.

One morning, the four Western reporters in the group told our guide, a press aide at the Foreign Ministry, that we wanted to skip the day's first meeting so we could spend a few hours exploring Murmansk on foot. After great deliberation among the Soviet officials responsible for the tour, we were told the change in schedule was O.K., but the Foreign Ministry aide would accompany us.

And so he did. As we strolled about the city, peering into store windows, buying posters and books, I thought about the almost incomprehensible obsession with security that this one interlude reflected. I wondered what this country, rich in natural and human resources, might accomplish if it rid itself of suspicion and mistrust.■